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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 001460

SIPDIS

NEA/ARP JHARRIS AND JBERNDT

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREF PREL SA YM

SUBJECT: UNHCR REPORTS WORSENING HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN
YEMEN

REF: RIYADH 1351

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Classified By: Ambassador James B. Smith for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Acting UNHCR Regional Representative Dr. Hamdi Bukhari reported that the humanitarian situation in Yemen is deteriorating and blamed clashes between the al-Houthi rebels and Yemeni forces for causing civilian casualties on October 29. Dr. Bukhari faulted the Saudi government for not doing enough to help those fleeing from conflict areas, but remained hopeful that through constructive dialogue, additional cooperation and assistance from the Saudi government would be forthcoming. UNHCR's top priorities were opening additional humanitarian corridors, and providing safe passage to those fleeing the conflict areas, and Bukhari reported that UNHCR critically needed additional resources to accomplish these goals. End Summary.

CLASHES BETWEEN REBELS AND YEMENI FORCES

¶2. (U) Acting Regional Representative for UNHCR, Dr. Hamdi Bukhari (Strictly Protect) elaborated on UNHCR press release on the situation, which reported that "random exchanges of fire" between al-Houthi rebels and government troops in northern Yemen had resulted in an unknown number of innocent civilian casualties on October 29. Bukhari explained that the victims belonged to a group of approximately 500 internally displaced persons (IDPs) who found shelter in Al Sam camp on the outskirts of Sa'ada city. Preliminary reports from field officers in the conflict zones indicated that there was no presence of government forces in the area and that "the attacks were random." He noted that 7 houses were destroyed by rocket fire, killing at least 20 people although UNHCR reported only an "unknown number" of casualties.

SAG NEEDS TO DO MORE

¶3. (C) Dr. Bukhari referred to an incident where 150 families from Razih fled to al-Jabri near the border only to be quickly turned around by Saudi border authorities. They were not even allowed to cross into Saudi Arabia for passage back into Yemen at a different point along the border. UNHCR, according to Dr. Bukhari, seeks to open additional

humanitarian crossing points and has urged the SAG to offer safe passage to IDPs fleeing conflict areas in Yemen.

¶14. (C) Dr. Bukhari opined that a bilateral security relationship calling for the "swift return of illegal immigrants" is driving current border security measures. The SAG has not yet recognized IDPs fleeing from these conflict zones, he explained, adding that the SAG classifies these individuals as illegal labor immigrants rather than as IDPs. He asked for USG help in conveying these concerns to the Saudi government.

¶15. (C) The UNHCR has "refrained from denouncing the border situation in order to leave room for dialogue with the SAG and encourage further humanitarian cooperation, but at some point," stated Dr. Bukhari, "the UNHCR will be forced to denounce the situation clearly and publicly" (Note: Dr. Bukhari was referencing SAG policy of turning IDPs fleeing conflict zones away at the border and not offering safe shelter to these people. End Note).

DETERIORATING HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

¶16. (C) According to Dr. Bukhari, the humanitarian situation in Yemen is very quickly "spiraling out of control." A recent security assessment of the Alp and Mandaba border area conducted by UNHCR officials concluded that humanitarian activity must be confined within 5km of the border because the security situation is too volatile and dangerous beyond this point. He also noted that additional humanitarian convoys in the Alp area were needed to provide relief to the

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growing number of IDPs. (Comment: Only last month, Dr. Bukhari told us that the basic needs of the IDPs in the Alp region had been met, and that additional humanitarian convoys to the region would not be needed - see reftel. End comment.) Dr. Bukhari acknowledged that he had not foreseen how quickly the humanitarian situation would degenerate. He emphasized that UNHCR needed additional material support to address the situation.

SAG MILITARY INVOLVEMENT?

¶17. (C) Asked indirectly whether there were any reports of SAG involvement in Yemen beyond that of protecting and securing the border, Dr. Bukhari always skirted around the implied question. However, when asked point-blank whether there were any reports from the field that indicated that the SAG was engaging in military-type operations in Yemen, Dr. Bukhari smiled and said, "We have seen a lot of things, but we are focusing on the humanitarian side of the Yemen situation." He would not elaborate any further and re-emphasized that UNHCR is only interested in humanitarian work. (Comment: Dr. Bukhari's observations are consistent with other reports that Saudi forces have provided some logistical support along the border to ROYG forces. We have no evidence of Saudi involvement beyond this. End comment.)

SMITH